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A Heartland Review Feature



One or Two Things I Know About Us: Rethinking the Image and Role of the Okies cont'd

by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

Conservatives loved it. Hailing its flag-waving slams at hippies, draft-dodgers, and campus radicals, President Nixon sent him a letter of congratulations. George Wallace thought it captured perfectly the message he had been trying to send to Washington and asked Haggard to sign on for the governor's ongoing presidential campaign. But the performer did not need politicians. The press was already proclaiming him a working-class hero, 'The poet laureate of the hard hats.'¹ Haggard had already won the hearts of his fellow Okies with populist hits about prison and running from the law, such as 'Mama Tried,' based on his own experience. But even before the fame of 'Okie from Muskogee,' Haggard had become more openly right-wing, contrasting the 'work-ethic' with welfare in 'I Take a Lot of Pride in What I Am' and 'Working Man's Blues.' 'Okie from Muskogee' was followed by the mean-spirited patriotic ballad, 'The Fighting Side of Me'

At the same time Haggard had begun to write about his Okie heritage, raising issues and questions that had been out of the public eye for two decades. 'Hungry Eyes' (1969) was the first of Haggard's autobiographical Dust Bowl ballads: he sings about being raised in 'A canvas-covered cabin, in a crowded labor camp,' where he soon learned that 'another class of people put us somewhere just below--One more reason for my mama's hungry eyes.'

Other Haggard songs pursued the theme: 'California Cotton Fields'; 'Tulare Dust,' 'They're Tearing the Labor Camps Down,'; 'The Roots of My Raising.' Haggard's songs, Gregory argues, 'broke open the reservoir of group pride and laid the foundation for a renaissance in group consciousness that became especially noticeable in the 1970s.'² Newspaper and magazine articles on Dust Bowl Okies appeared. In the midst of demands for Ethnic Studies programs, some California Valley colleges experimented with Okie Studies. Now in his mid-fifties, Haggard, the most famous of the second generation of famed Okie songwriters and performers, was a schoolmate with writer Gerald Haslam in the Okie town of Oildale, and they have remained friends over the years. Carey McWilliams described Haslam's stories in Okies as 'Country music set to prose.'

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Gerald Haslam was a part of the literary generation that emerged during the 1960s, writers of the U.S. West who began articulating a literary genre, owing much to Wallace Stegner's Stanford writing workshop. Texan Larry McMurtry and Okie-Oregonian Ken Kesey were the most acclaimed among the new writers. Although Kesey's characters and settings, particularly in *Sometimes a Great Notion*, reflect the Southwest migrant subculture, he has never romanticized or emphasized his heritage. Similarly, Leonard Gardner's *Fat City* is set in the boxing world of Stockton, California, without specifying Okies as such. Some of the work of California writer, James D. Houston, whose father hailed from Oklahoma, explores themes of the Okie subculture including *Native Son of the Golden West* (1971), which enters the world of evangelical religion within which Houston grew up, and *The Men in My Life*.

But it is Gerald Haslam who has made the Okie explicit in his fiction and non-fiction. Haslam describes himself as 'a fifth-generation Californian,' with a father from Texas and a native Californian mother. He sets many of his stories in his hometown of Oildale which is in Kern County near Bakersfield and home to the largest California Okie community. In 1975, Haslam published his first collection of short stories, *Okies*, and the following year *Masks: A Novel*, also featuring Okies and set in Oildale, appeared. Haslam and Houston co-edited *California Heartland: Writing from the Great Central Valley* (1978), a multiethnic collection which includes Okie poet, Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel, and short story writer, DeWayne Rail, as well as a story by Leonard Gardner and excerpts from Haslam and Houston's own work.

All the Okie writers explore the dual themes of salvation and sin that permeate the Okie subculture: Gregory describes 'a community split between two poles, oriented on the one hand around stern-minded religiosity and on the other hand around hard-drinking irreverence--a community of churches and saloons, of churchgoers and good old boys.'

Haslam's work radically departs from a stance of white supremacy by including Mexicans, Chinese, Blacks, and Native Americans in his stories as well as promoting writers from those groups in his collections of California writing. Yet he does not stray far from the Okie mythology and explicitly defends its sources. 'California Christmas' is a first-person coming of age story of the early days of migrant life in the San Joaquin Valley. 'Things was powerful hard that first winter after we come to California.' The boy tells of the family searching for work, the unending sun broken only by thick gray fog, sickness, broken down vehicles, no clothes or shoes to go to school. Trying to pool their resources to make a Christmas celebration, the camped families are interrupted by the sheriff who turns out to be friendly.

The resolution to their dilemma is expressed by an older man: 'These ain't bad folks out here. They're just skeered, skeered as they can be. They figure we might get their jobs, see.'Christian forgiveness prevails.

Haslam continues the theme of Christian virtue in 'Sally Let Her Bangs Hang Down.' The narrator, a country singer, falls in love with a 'fallen woman' who parties and has slept around. He is nearly destroyed by his obsession with the woman, nearly ruining his career and sick with ulcers. Then he finds Jesus and identifies his woman with Mary Magdalene. He converts her and they abandon the honky-tonk life for gospel music, finding happiness, peace, and even wealth when he hits the country charts with his recording of 'What a Friend I Have in Jesus.'

Another theme that pervades Haslam's fiction, fist-fighting and violence, is introduced in 'Cowboys.' Two oil field workers, one an Okie and one a slumming, long-haired college boy dressed in cowboy outfit, clash, and, of course, the Okie wins. The theme of toughness is found also in 'Before Dishonor.' An Okie just out of Marine boot camp acquires a 'Death Before Dishonor' tattoo which becomes a permanent challenge to all comers. He loses most of his fights, but he consoles himself: 'She's a rough ol' life, but you got to take her like she comes...Well at least I ain't been killed yet.'

Haslam's second publication, a novel, *Masks*, is more autobiographical. An Okie professor in the Bay Area, as Haslam is, returns to his hometown of Oildale to tend to his ailing mother. He has to fight the racist objections of his sisters to have his mother treated by his old school buddy, a Chicano, now a doctor. However, the mother suffers a fatal heart attack, with the Chicano doctor, and the citified professor blamed by family and neighbors. *Masks* thus confronts Okie racism, albeit somewhat idealistically. Haslam's Chicano doctor, victim of prejudice, agrees with the professor that 'I think people here are the real revolutionaries, not those nuts I read about up in the bay area...Those chingasos up there pick huge, abstract causes they can't win because, ese, they don't want to win;...Down here, they win.' The Chicano character believes the Okies care about the minorities because they live in the same place and have to work things out. The professor agrees and says that he has no respect for 'campus free speech advocates who hooted down everyone they disagreed with.' Momentarily, the professor feels alienated from both the City and the Valley; he has become 'a man without a country.' Yet he leaves with new clarity and connectedness.

Throughout his work, Haslam tackles, with the same maddening ambivalence I feel, the racism in the Okie community he so loves and admires. 'I abhor the racism and xenophobia of my home area, and have said so in print often enough to have earned myself a few beefs when home...But I nonetheless prefer the frontal approach to life, the lack of trendiness, and the potential for effective change I find in Kern County.'

In later Haslam stories, typical contemporary Okie characters appear—country singers, brawlers, preachers, truckers, matriarchs, and whores—along with Mexicans, Blacks, Native Americans, relocated Japanese-Americans, who are portrayed respectfully in all their complexity and contradictions. Okies never prevail in their racism but do overcome city-slickers.

In Haslam's 1983 collection, *Hawk Fights*, the story 'Hey, Okie'; portrays a veteran of the Dust Bowl being interviewed by a professor who pretends to be an expert on the working class. The old Okie rails against FDR, blaming the New Deal for the farmers' eviction from their Oklahoma soil, claims never to have heard of Woody Guthrie, and brags about scabbing on trade unionists, confusing and humbling the professor. Haslam seems to project an insider/outsider dichotomy which unites the rural poor and condemns all 'city slickers' including union organizers, professors, students, and radicals.

Although a major theme in Haslam's fiction is violence, he avoids the question of guns in his fiction (except for hunting) and the Okie oral history of gun-fighting heroes. This is particularly surprising since Haslam's first work, written as a graduate student and later published, was on Jack Schaefer, the author of *Shane* upon which the block-buster Fifties gun-fighting movie was based. By avoiding the fascination with guns, Haslam neglects the attraction Okies have for militarism, regular and irregular—from the Minutemen, the right-wing terrorists formed mainly among Okies in the San Bernardino Valley during the Fifties, to the Marines. Even today, hundreds of gun shows take place up and down the valleys of California (and throughout the Southwest) every weekend, packed with Okies talking, selling, and buying guns.

Haslam has dealt with Okie gun craziness in his non-fiction. He wrote about the armed white supremacist 'Possee Comitatus' in the agricultural valleys of California in 1975 for *The Nation*. The Posse was founded in Portland, Oregon, in 1969, by Henry Beach, who had been a member of the Silver Shirts, a Nazi-inspired Hitler-support organization. For six years the group was little known until the FBI in Little Rock, Arkansas, received information about a plot to assassinate then vice-president Nelson Rockefeller because he was a 'Money Czar.' These white supremacist groups believe that the Rockefellers are closet Jews because all bankers are Jews and that the Federal Reserve and the tax system are controlled by an international Jewish conspiracy. Seventy-eight Posse chapters in twenty-three states were identified. In 1983, the North Dakota Posse, resisting subpoenas for federal income tax evasion, fatally shot two federal marshals. In hunting down the main fugitive, the FBI uncovered huge arsenals in Arkansas. The group still flourishes along with other similar ones.

Haslam was sympathetic with the frustration that drove this group, however misguided their views. Because 'unenlightened indictments so promiscuously mouthed by some liberal elitists have served to separate many poor whites from any possibility of a broader-based movement...they return to older, often ugly patterns of organization.' The success of the posse, he argued, 'should lead the rest of us to a serious re-examination of the forces that have produced such vigilante activities. If we don't, our judgments become as shallow as many of theirs.'; But Haslam does not define the 'forces' which he alludes.

In another 1975 *Nation* article, Haslam wrote of a near lynching by Okie young men of black athletes at the local junior college in

nearly all white, Okie populated town of Taft, California. Again Haslam skirts the issue of white supremacy and violence: 'Precisely because they had isolated themselves from nonwhites, many residents of Taft were poorly prepared for the rise in black pride and consciousness during the 1960s. Their ignorance of blacks easily festered into fear and hate.' Haslam concedes that 'Taft has carried the cross of its Ku Klux Klan past even among its tainted neighbors.'

Okies and other Southwestern whites commonly address the question of racism in terms of 'ignorance of blacks' or 'not knowing them.' But, a part of Haslam's avoidance or justification for Okie attraction to violence may be explained by his righteous sense of mission to correct the negative stereotypes about Okies that pervaded the Central Valley during the starving time when he was growing up in a more privileged position than the children of Okie migrants. Discrimination against Okies was fierce throughout California. Even in 1960, when I moved to the state from Oklahoma, my accent and license plate were cause for abuse. Haslam argues: Another common charge was that Okies were lawless. This grew in part because the newcomers refused to be pushed around and were quick to throw punches if insulted. In another limited, memorable sense--beyond the predictable, poverty-related crime--it was true. There had developed before the migration a Robin Hood syndrome that grew in part from the frontiersmen's distrust of institution and in part from the Anglo-Saxon tradition of honorable outlaws. Acting outside the law was one recourse otherwise powerless people had in the face of what they considered an unjust system. Haslam, although admirably anti-racist, consistently defends the Okies, challenging the negative stereotypes while perpetuating the positive myths. Writing of the Thirties migrants, he echoes Steinbeck: 'So strong was the nesting instinct that it was not uncommon for an Okie family to establish residence even while the father, and often the mother too, continued following crops until a stable job could be found. The family came first--especially the children...'

In a departure from the main themes of the Okie myth, Dan Morgan's *Rising in the West: The True Story of an 'Okie' Family from the Great Depression Through the Reagan Years* links the Okie migration to the rise of Reagan, Nixon, Goldwater, politicized Protestant fundamentalism, and the anti-abortion movement. Morgan focuses on Oca Tatum and his family. He traces their migration from Oklahoma to the California fruit fields to suburban prosperity with success in agribusiness, the defense industry, real-estate development, nursing home chains, and football franchises. What is valuable and unusual in Morgan's case study, although written in an annoying folksy style and reading like an admiring 'authorized' biography at times, is his emphasis on the Christian fundamentalism of the Tatum's and their deep involvement with the movement that gave rise to the religious right and Reaganism. Tatum, and his money, were tied to Oklahoma evangelist, Oral Roberts, to Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, Pat Robinson, and the 'Moral Majority' Anti-abortion, anti-union, anti-affirmative action, anti-immigrant, and pro-militarist, pro-law and order, pro-family values' Tatum was a major funder for the movement that sought to do to Sixties consciousness what the McCarthy era did to the Thirties.

Gregory identifies religion as a major obstacle to unionization of the Okie migrants. Okies brought evangelical and charismatic religion with them to California. 'Many of these churches belonged to Pentecostal or Holiness sects that taught that all forms of political action were wrong because they distracted from the pursuit of individual salvation'

Although in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck made his preacher character a militant trade unionist who led the people in that direction, such evangelists actually had become rare by the 1930s. During the Wobbly and Socialist era before World War I, evangelists had preached radicalism from their pulpits but the anti-communist campaign of the federal government and gains by the KKK transformed their message. Fundamentalism became inseparable from patriotism, white supremacy, and anti-communism, as it is today, providing an important channel for propagating bigotry.

Historian James Gregory writes:

Ultimately, the Okie is an invention, a work of collective imagination. Over the last half century, pieces of group identity have been assembled from many sources; from shared traumas of the Depression era, from ancestral legend, from popular media, from Steinbeck, Lange, and Haggard. And those pieces generally have less to do with symbols of regionalism than with Americanism.

Gregory limits his excellent study of the Okie migration and their fate in California to their exodus from the Southwest to the Promised Land of California. Yet that trek was a continuation of an historical process that began in the British Isles in the seventeenth century when British-colonized Scots were tapped as a permanent settler colony, first to northern Ireland, and then to the British colonies in North America.

Gregory, Morgan, Haslam, and other observers point out that the Okie world view has spread through politics, religion and culture, but they do not link Okie/Ulster-Scots mythology and ideology with imperialism, or 'empire as a way of life,' as William Appleman Williams phrased it.

Okies are the latter-day carriers of the national origin myth, a matrix of stories that justify conquest and settlement, transforming the white settler (explorer, hunter, pioneer, frontiersman, 'the man who knows Indian') into an indigenous people who believe they are the true natives of the continent, much as the Afrikaners regard themselves. Furthermore, this narrative, essentially that of *The Last of the Mohicans*, must remain intact for the continuation of the particular ideology that supports and refuels white supremacy, American exceptionalism and U.S. imperialism.

The promise of land or gold, oil, uranium strikes, and adventure provided the pull factor for the westward movement, and land foreclosures, failed crops, and lack of capital in Europe and the British colonies, and later the takeover of acquired land by U.S.

corporations provided the push factor. A few along the way, like Morgan's Oca Tatum, or Merle Haggard, did strike it rich. For the rest, white supremacy has been a bone to throw to the Okie dogs, their reward, also essential to maintenance of the system. White supremacy works internally mainly in relation to blacks and other minorities and immigrants in the United States, but also globally in relation to the Third World. Militarism is necessary to maintain the corporate capitalist ruling class so imperialism must be reproduced in a defensible popular form.

But the problem with understanding the mercurial Okies does not lie only with Steinbeck-to-Haslam literature, rather U.S. storytelling in general, whether fiction or history. As the late historian, William Appleman Williams, noted, 'We Americans...have produced very, very few anti-imperialists. Our idiom has been empire, and so the primary division was and remains between the soft and the hard.'

American writers and historians would do well to look to South African Afrikaner writers, particularly Andre Brink's *An Act of Terror* and Rian Malan's *My Traitor's Heart*, to better understand the culture of imperialism as preserved by the manipulation of its core settlers who have a big investment and stake in it--their entire identity as a people.

Like Rian Malan telling the secrets of his kin, the Afrikaners, I feel like a traitor writing what I know about US, especially because the prejudice and discrimination against poor whites, like all poor people in the U.S., continues unabated. Recently, I attended a Berkeley gathering of writers that featured a 'cowboy poet' from the 'Pacific Northwest.' I was certain that I'd be encountering an Okie, but to my surprise this 'cowboy poet' was a thirty-something, slick operator and stand-up comic who knew nothing of cowboy history. He told me that his family had come 'two generations ago' from Russia and invested in land along the Columbia River. When I told him I was writing about Okies, he said, 'Okies and Arkies, sure, they came around and worked for my dad--dirty, ignorant people.'

I cannot help but think of another time, a time when the people I come from almost became a revolutionary force, a time when white supremacy nearly was shed, and the KKK was considered to be a tool of the enemy, when militarism was reviled and internationalism embraced. The people I come from, who sacrificed and struggled to the death, supported Eugene Debs, who stated in 1915:

When I say I am opposed to war I mean ruling class war, for the ruling class is the only class that makes war...I would be shot for treason before I would enter such a war....I have no country to fight for; my country is the earth; I am a citizen of the world...I am opposed to every war but one; I am for that war with heart and soul, and that is the world-wide war of the social revolution. In that war I am prepared to fight in any way the ruling class may make necessary, even to the barricades.

I marvel that my own grandfather, a classic product of the westward trek and the national origin story, and so many others

like him, voted, over a period of two decades, five times for Debs for president.

*Editor's Note: In 1968, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz became a founding member of the early women's liberation movement. Along with a small group of dedicated women, she produced the seminal journal series, **No More Fun and Games**.*

Dunbar-Ortiz was also a dedicated anti-war activist and organizer throughout the 1960s and 1970s. During the war years she was a fiery, indefatigable public speaker on issues of patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, and racism. She worked in Cuba with the Venceremos Brigade and formed associations with other revolutionaries across the spectrum of radical and underground politics, including the SDS, the Weather Underground, the Revolutionary Union, and the African National Congress. But unlike the majority of those in the New Left, Dunbar-Ortiz grew up poor, female, and part-Indian in rural Oklahoma, and she often found herself at odds not only with the ruling class but also with the Left and with the women's movement.

*Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz is a historian and professor in the Department of Ethnic Studies at California State University, Hayward. She is the author of *Red Dirt: Growing Up Okie* (Verso), *The Great Sioux Nation*, and *Roots of Resistance*, among other books. In mid-2002 we published the epilogue to her book, *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975*.*

You can learn more about her at her [website](#).

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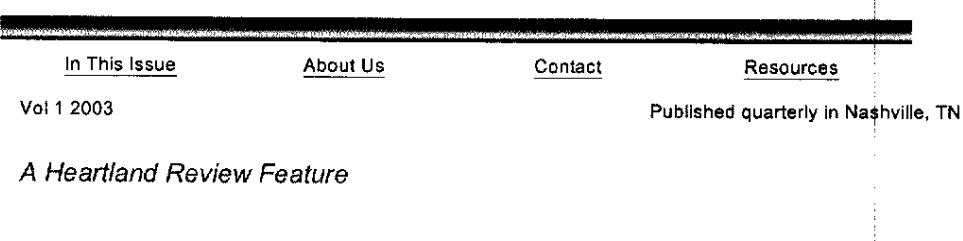
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One or Two Things I Know About Us: Rethinking the Image and Role of the Oakies cont'd

by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

It was in this spirited, politically-charged atmosphere that John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. The blockbuster novel, together with the 1940 epic film of *The Grapes of Wrath*, etched a picture of the Okies in the minds of a whole generation, and for those who have come since, represents not fiction, but truth.

The socialist sentiment of the pre-World War I period profoundly affected many of the next generation of Oklahomans, Will Rogers being the best known exponent. Their brand of socialism was frontier populism which never addressed white supremacy. As a young man, Will Rogers worked on cattle ranches in South Africa in 1903, just after the Boer War. He greatly admired the tough Boers who seemed to him exactly like his own rural folk back in eastern Oklahoma. He was contemptuous of the indigenous black Africans and of the British defeat of the Boers. U.S. Historian Michael Kammen observes the similarity of the U.S. and South African Boer use of symbols and myth: 'The Afrikaners depended heavily upon a cluster of historical myths in order to rationalize their repressive hegemony and policy of racial separation. The vital elements within that cluster involve a Great Trek to the interior made by Boers in 1838 in order to achieve autonomy from the British in their own promised land.' Historian George Frederickson pursues the comparison in depth, stating that 'The basis...is the common fact of a long and often violent struggle for territorial supremacy between white invaders and indigenous peoples.'

As a celebrated political and social satirist in the 1920s and 1930s, Will Rogers became a leftist-populist. Woody Guthrie followed in Rogers' wake. During the mid-1930s, Guthrie hoboed to California as the troubadour of the Dust Bowl migrants. He wrote ballads honoring the Oklahoma outlaws hounded and killed by the FBI, such as Pretty Boy Floyd. But he also wrote of Jesse James, comparing him to Jesus Christ. Jesse James, his brother Frank, and the Younger Brothers who together made up the train and bank robbing 'James Gang,' were Confederate irregulars who continued their own war against the Union after the Civil War ended.

Guthrie sang the rural Oklahoma oral tradition in apolitical songs he made famous like 'Hard Travelin', 'So Long, It's Been Good to Know

You,' and especially 'This Land is Your Land.' Being unreligious and anti-establishment, Guthrie wrote 'This Land' to counteract the top hit at the time, Irving Berlin's, 'God Bless America.' Guthrie's biographer, Joe Klein notes: 'No piece of music had bothered him so much...'God Bless America,' indeed--it was just another of those songs that told people not to worry, that God was in the driver's seat.'

In Los Angeles Guthrie met Communist Party organizers who adopted him and made him famous by the association. Al Richmond, editor of the Communist Party newspaper wrote in his autobiography, 'ran into this young hillbilly singer from Oklahoma, who turned out to be socially conscious (in a favorite phrase of that era), and accepted an invitation to perform at several Left events.' Guthrie offered to write a column for the paper, but 'being suspicious of folksiness and words misspelled for comic effect, I wondered at first: is this columnist phony or genuine?' Richmond met him and found him to be 'a man in his late twenties, slender and wiry, a wild mop of hair and a beard. He might have been called a hippie in later years, except that his Oklahoma speech was authentic and so was his familiarity with the folkways of the open road as it was traveled by uprooted farmers and migratory workers. He was genuine.'

In attracting someone like Woody Guthrie, and involving thousands of Okie migrants in strikes and elections, leftist organizers and artists may have been reinforced in believing that Americanism had done the trick. Actually, the Americanism created deep cultural and political contradictions which would make the Communist Party and its 'fellow travelers' vulnerable to the witch-hunts to come. Even worse, the consciousness of the 'masses' as democratic imperialists was reinforced.

The decade of the 1930s was the period of the 'Popular Front against Fascism' organized by the Communist International. The U.S. Communist Party thrived when it spread out and unified with other groups. One of their tactics, which remained a signature of the Party, was its attempt to 'Americanize' the party: 'Communism is twentieth century Americanism' was the new party slogan as it displayed American flags and replaced the 'Internationale' with 'The Star-Spangled Banner,' and elevated the U.S. 'founding fathers' to equal status with Marx and Lenin. (The U.S. volunteers to Spain named their brigades after George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, not after John Brown, Big Bill Haywood, Eugene Debs, Mother Jones, Nat Turner, Frances Wright, or Crazyhorse.)

Richard Slotkin perceptively observes that the Popular Front drew on the same ideology of American exceptionalism that 'had traditionally informed the rhetoric of conservatives and isolationists, who had used it to discredit the radical critiques of American society developed by the Left.'

During the same period, William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* romanticized the South by contextualizing plantation culture in a legend of wilderness conquest, while *Go Down, Moses* redefined the Frontier Myth in southern terms. Carl Sandburg's best-selling biography of Abraham Lincoln portrayed him as the hero of western folklore. And in *Mainland* (1936), Gilbert Seldes created a 'left-

'Turnerism' which emphasized the Frontier as an indigenous American radical tradition, drawing on the Whiskey Rebellion, Jeffersonian agrarianism, Jacksonian leveling, John Brown anti-slavery and Lincoln Republicanism, Populism, and the radical unionism of the IWW. The *Grapes of Wrath* drew on the same myths by identifying the wanderings of the Joads with images of covered wagons heading west.

John Steinbeck published *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939. The blockbuster novel, together with the 1940 epic film based on the book, etched an indelible picture of the Okies in the minds of a whole generation. For them and for those who have come since, the book represents not fiction, but truth. Steinbeck was already a celebrity when he published *The Grapes of Wrath* due to his 1935 best-seller *Tortilla Flat*. After meeting Tom Collins, an organizer for the Communist Party's Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union, he published *In Dubious Battle*. The book, although sympathetic to the Okie farm workers, portrays the Communist organizers as cold manipulators. Despite this, the Party sang Steinbeck's praises.

The writer began research for what would become *The Grapes of Wrath* in the Federal Resettlement Administration's facility for migrants in Arvin, California, the Weedpatch Camp. Steinbeck never spent any time in Oklahoma—he drove through on Route 66 once—but he was a keen observer and listener, and absorbed the self-perceptions of the Okie migrants, their own idealization of themselves and their dreams of more free land, more empire. *The Grapes of Wrath* was fueled with myth, but Steinbeck did not create the myth; he merely reported and dramatized it in a monumental work of fiction.

Meanwhile, Steinbeck published a series of impassioned articles on the farm Workers' plight, 'The Harvest Gypsies,' which appeared in the pro-labor San Francisco daily *News* in October 1936. Steinbeck 'viewed the migrants as displaced Jeffersonian yeomen who needed and deserved their own small plots of land,' Charles Wollenberg observes. 'Unfortunately, this ran counter to the whole direction of California agricultural history. The state's rural economy had never been dominated by small, Jeffersonian yeomen.' Yet the ideology of the promise of land did reflect the Okie mythology. Like the Boers in South Africa, the Okies believed that their suffering was for a cause, mixing Christian fundamentalism with grass-roots patriotism. And as with the Boers and their sense of 'protecting' South Africa, the Okie ideology has prevailed in the United States as 'defenders' of the country.

The Dust Bowl migration to the California fields largely displaced Asian and Mexican labor from the farm labor force. Steinbeck hailed this change: 'Farm labor in California will be white labor, it will be American labor, and it will insist on a standard of living much higher than that which was accorded the foreign 'cheap labor.' A subsequent writer on the Okies, Gerald Haslam came to a different conclusion about the significance of the Dust Bowl migration for California agriculture: 'The final effect of the Okies coming was to impede the unionization of farm labor.'

Steinbeck's 1936 articles about the 'Harvest Gypsies' were

collected and published in 1938 as *Their Blood is Strong*. He stressed the racial superiority of the migrants, writing that 'They have weathered the thing, and they can weather much more for their blood is strong.' He portrayed Okies as pre-industrial and deeply democratic: In their heads, as they move wearily from harvest to harvest, there is one urge and one overwhelming need, to acquire a little land again, and to settle on it and stop their wandering...

Having been brought up in the prairies where industrialization never penetrated, they have jumped with no transition from the old agrarian, self-containing farm where nearly everything used was raised or manufactured, to a system of agriculture so industrialized that the man who plants a crop does not often see, let alone harvest, the fruit of his planting, where the migrant has no contact with the growing cycle.

And there is another difference between their old life and the new. They have come from the little farm districts where democracy was not only possible but inevitable, where popular government, whether practiced in the Grange, in church organization or in local government, was the responsibility of every man.

But the Okies were hardly innocent of industrialization since the whole area of the Southwest where they came from had long been one vast oil field and refinery, along with cotton and wheat cash crops and mines. Even more romantic is Steinbeck's portrayal of Town-Hall democracy, when what they had experienced in the 'old life' powerlessness under the boots of 'elected' gangster rings robbing the public coffers. Dan Morgan described the reality of eastern Oklahoma in the early twentieth century: 'a kind of third world republic, fabulously rich in resources, but corrupt, dangerous, and sorely lacking in well-functioning institutions.' It was characterized by 'a reliance on foreign capital, volatile prices of the commodities in the ground or grown above it, a floating rural proletariat, wild land speculation, serious health problems related to industrial pollution, a scarcity of medical services, tremendous extremes of wealth and poverty, bouts of martial law, and death and terror squads of several political persuasions.' Rural workers and their families 'tramped between mine, smelter, refinery, and farm as the fortunes of some commodity rose and fell according to the vagaries of the world economy.'

Assessing the impact of *The Grapes of Wrath* at the time and on future generations is as difficult as with *Gone With the Wind*. The publication of *The Grapes of Wrath* was the biggest literary event of the decade: 'No American novel published in this century has aroused such a storm...Viking shipped out 430,000 copies by the end of the year...Perhaps it spoke to the concern with how the parts of America fit into the whole.' In 1982, the *New York Times* reported that it was the second best-selling novel ever in paperback in the United States having sold nearly fifteen million copies. White supremacy was a major element in the wide appeal of *The Grapes of Wrath* and Okie mythology, both on the popular level--a sort of poor white *Gone With the Wind*--and on the Left as a working class novel.

Without allowing the question of racism to be debated, the

Communist Party operated on a dual track in organizing poor whites and poor blacks, even for a time supporting the idea of a separate Black Nation in the South. The strategy of the Party was to bring Black and White together in mutual respect and alliances for common goals. Woody Guthrie and his black counterpart, Huddie Ledbetter 'Leadbelly'), a Louisiana sharecropper and ex-con 'discovered' by the Party, were the perfect bookends for this vision.

Leadbelly's hits included 'Goodnight Irene,'; 'Midnight Special,'The Rock Island Line,'; mostly in the form of covers by other singers, especially the Party's own Pete Seeger. Seeger and the Weavers'; 'Goodnight Irene'; broke all sales records when it was released in 1950. Three years later the singing group was blacklisted and impoverished. Okies loved the song and had no idea it had been written by a black man, much less recorded by Communists--my father still does not believe it--yet no one phrase expresses the Okie philosophy as well as its refrain: 'Sometimes I live in the country,/Sometimes I live in the town;/Sometimes I get a great notion/To jump into the river an' drown.' (Ken Kesey took the title of his second novel, about Okie loggers in Oregon, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, from 'Goodnight Irene.'

Yet the appearance of Communist-led Okie radicalism was deceptive. 'Even as many Southwesterners continued to use a class-based terminology of the plain versus the powerful,' James Gregory writes, 'more persuasive commitments to patriotism, racism, toughness, and independence were pointing towards the kind of conservative populism that George Wallace would articulate three decades later.'

Dorothy Healey, a 1930s Communist union organizer of the migrant workers, and later head of the Southern California region of the Communist Party for two decades, tells in her memoir of the 1938 cotton strike in Kern County and celebrates, without reflection, the militancy and solidarity of the Okie cotton pickers, hardly mentioning that the strike was lost. In the following chapter, Healey moves on to the anti-Nazi war time effort and never mentions the Okies again. It's a mystery what she may think of what happened to them and their progeny.

Steinbeck moved on as well: after the film of *The Grapes of Wrath* came out in 1940, and he won the Pulitzer Prize, he left his house in Los Gatos and the migrants behind. Okie characters did not appear in later Steinbeck work.

How did a people so filled with a populist and socialist tradition come to form the most conservative constituencies in California--those in the Central Valley, Ventura County, Orange County--bringing characters like Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan to state and eventually national power? 'The patriotic fervor and uncompromising repression of the war and Red Scare years [after World War I] had begun the process,' Gregory argues. 'Next came the nativist, fundamentalist, and moral reform crusades of the 1920s. The Ku Klux Klan attained for a time major influence in the region, taking power in Texas and Arkansas and coming close in Oklahoma.'

Of course, deep-seated and historic white supremacy permeates the culture and institutions of the United States. When the core group of native white Americans, the very foot soldiers of empire, began turning socialist, the government acted swiftly, viciously and relentlessly to crush the movement. Also, powerful propaganda accompanied repression. The D.W. Griffith film extolling the Ku Klux Klan, 'The Birth of a Nation' appeared in 1915, and after the Russian and Mexican Revolutions of 1918, red scare propaganda flooded airwaves, newspapers, and sermons. Okies were left with a recollection of hard times and hatred for big government and the rich and powerful, and they fell back on the protection of their white supremacy.

Reading left writers from the 1930s, I am struck by how out of touch with the history of the United States they were, how caught up in its origin myth, how immersed in the culture of empire they were. Edward Said's study, *Culture and Imperialism* makes a point about European imperial culture which applies to the United States as well. Said argues that although the main battle of imperialism with its indigenous inhabitants was over land, in debates over land ownership, settlement, and plans for its future, narrative was crucial. 'The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them.'

In the populist and left narratives of the Thirties, economic oppression and common cause were supposed automatically to erase white supremacy, but they did not and have not yet. And although the Left in the United States has long since abandoned the Okies as an organizable group, it has continued to seek a progressive white base, something akin to the quest for 'the great white wonder' in boxing and other sports: Legitimacy in the United States lies in whiteness. There is a widespread assumption in the United States, and particularly among Leftists, that white supremacy is a 'false ideology' when found among workers and that common struggle and familiarity can eradicate it. However, white supremacy appears to be much more than an ideology, or even a privilege which produces a measure of advantage; rather it manifests itself as a goal, as satisfying as material wealth, as nationalism obviously is in other contexts. White supremacy in the United States is backed by the largest imperial economy and military in human history, no small cause for 'pride.' Rather than challenging the sources of white supremacy, that is, the very narrative of the origins of the United States, current multiculturalism tends toward attempting to include non-whites in the traditional narrative without altering it substantially.

Although Okie visibility in California waned for more than two decades, it was revived in the late Sixties, for the Okies and their offspring had not forgotten their identity or experience. Okie culture has been memorialized and kept alive by a thriving country and western music industry built in Bakersfield by Okie artists and entrepreneurs, especially Buck Owen and Merle Haggard. Their working man blues take on country music has come to challenge the supremacy of Nashville as the country music capitol. During the 1970s, Gerald Haslam, James Houston and other writers of Southwestern descent began to form a literary sub-genre within the literature of the western United States. During the late 1960s, at the height of the youth, antiwar, and Black Power movements, young

white Appalachian migrants in Chicago and the children of Okie migrants in Oregon formed 'The Young Patriots,' celebrating their working class and populist roots. In 1989, a new generation was introduced to *The Grapes of Wrath*, as its fiftieth anniversary was celebrated with new critical publications, Steinbeck's notebooks, and new editions of the novel. Since that time several scholarly and popular books have appeared—James Gregory's *American Exodus*; Toby Sonneman's *Fruit Fields in My Blood: Okie Migrants in the West*; Dan Morgan's *Rising in the West*; and Michael Wallis' *Route 66 The Mother Road and Pretty Boy: The Life and Times of Charles Arthur Floyd*.

Contradictory romantic myths about the westward trek exist side by side, both having been reconstructed during the 'Revolutionary Decade' the Thirties, and both reinforcing strands of the American origin myths. The Jeffersonian yeoman farmer, owning land and practicing grass-roots democracy was favored by Steinbeck. Another was personified in Woody Guthrie's 'Hard Traveling' image.

The late Wallace Stegner, in his final published book of essays, identifies the 'American character' with trekking: Insofar as the West as a civilization at all between the time of Lewis and Clark's explorations and about 1870, it was largely a civilization in motion, driven by dreams. The people who composed and represented it were part of a true Folk-Wandering, credulous, hopeful, hardy, largely uninformed. The dreams are not dead even today, and the habit of mobility has only been reinforced by time.

Ever since Daniel Boone took his first excursion over Cumberland Gap, Americans have been wanderers...With a continent to take over and Manifest Destiny to goad us, we could not have avoided being footloose. The initial act of emigration from Europe, an act of extreme, deliberate disaffiliation, was the beginning of a national habit. Although Stegner goes on to lament the down side of American wanderlust, particularly the destruction of the environment, he sees trekking as forming the continuing primary identity of the 'American.'

Gregory identifies four major themes of the enduring Okie mythology: 'Plain-folk Americanism'(the original natives, the true Americans, white supremacist, egalitarian and anti-elitist, cult of toughness); 'Up from the dust'(a reconstructed Horatio Alger myth combined with Biblical persecution and exodus; the work ethic, anti-welfare); 'Special to God' (evangelical, the chosen people, easily forgiven for transgression);'The language of a subculture'(reproducing the oral tradition and the Okie dialect).

Okie mythology is almost sacred and deeply felt, framing an authentic sub-culture in the United States. Okie writer James Houston tells how for years he studied classical and flamenco guitar with considerable success: I was never much good at sophistication. It runs right against the grain. But I confess that I have hungered for it...But it took me twenty years of part-time music life to discover, or rather to quit being ashamed of the fact and come right out and admit that I love San Antonio Rose¹ more. If I am sitting in a honky tonk when the pedal steel begins to whine the opening bars of that song, I have no choice but to surrender. I hear a calling in the blood. It launches me. It fills me with unabashed

glee.

Just as the Okie migratory theme was losing basis in reality, as fewer and fewer Okies followed the crops, country music picked up the theme making truck drivers the new heroes of the west:

Tough and independent, yet also part of a proud fraternity, the truck driver synchronized old values with a new context. Part loner, part team player, modern and yet still free to roam the wide spaces, these eighteen-wheel cowboys knew how to manage the machinery of modern life without losing their independence. It was a symbol that worked for both old audiences and new.

Nowhere is the popularity of the music more widespread than in the southern Central Valley, around the country music capitol of Bakersfield. Radio evangelists compete with country music stations, preachers with songsters, churches with honky-tonks.

More than anything else, the Okie sub-culture is known for country music which burst out of its Southeast and Southwestern boundaries with their migration to California. Gene Autry who grew up in Oklahoma was already a famous radio singer among rural whites when he went to Hollywood in 1934 and became a national star. His success spawned other Hollywood country stars—Roy Rogers (albeit from Ohio), Tex Ritter, Bob Wills, Spade Cooley, and many others.

By the time Woody Guthrie arrived in Los Angeles in 1937 he easily found a niche. Ironically, although Guthrie wrote songs almost exclusively about the misery and struggle of Dust Bowl Okies, his songs, other than the apolitical ones, were little known outside Left and labor circles in New York where he went in 1940. His music did inspire the future protest music of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan but was hardly known in country music circles or to Okies in California or the Southwest. As Gerald Haslam writes of Woody Guthrie: "...he remains far more celebrated in Berkeley's salons than in Bakersfield's saloons." Haslam's observation rings true: I never heard of Woody Guthrie while growing up in Oklahoma, nor had my parents who lived their entire lives not far from Guthrie's hometown of Okemah. As a student at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley during the early Sixties'; folk revival, my friends found that hard to believe.

The dominant theme of Bakersfield country music was nostalgia for home such as, 'Hillbilly Gal,'; 'Some Sweet Home,'; 'Deep in the Heart of Texas,'; 'By the Silv'ry Rio Grande,'; 'Red River Valley,'; 'Take Me Back to Tulsa.' The songs carried, and created, the oral tradition of the Okies, and served to maintain the subculture, especially the language, across generations.

At the height of the antiwar and student protest movement in 1969, 'Okie from Muskogee' hit the airwaves and introduced Merle Haggard, already a star on the country waves, to cross-over superstardom:

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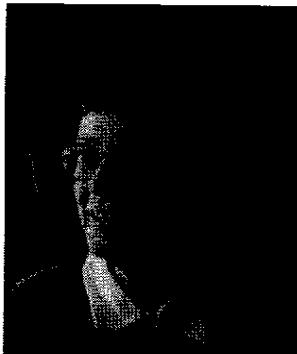
A Heartland Review Feature



One or Two Things I Know About Us: Rethinking the Image and Role of the Okies cont'd

by Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

Although the newspaper report was sketchy about the man's background, I can almost imagine his life: Possibly the child of Oklahoma sharecropping parents who migrated to California during the mid-1930s Dust Bowl, he was born one year after the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, perhaps in a labor camp in the Central Valley. His older brothers and sisters would have been taunted in school for being ragged, hungry, and dirty; his family was not allowed in the many places that hung signs that said 'No Okies.' His parents probably got on their feet during the wartime boom and soon he could feel superior at least toward the Mexicans and Blacks because his parents taught him to be proud of being white and a native-born American.



Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz

He might have grown up to drive a truck or work in the oil fields or construction, but he became a California Highway Patrolman. Very likely he voted for Reagan for governor, Nixon for president, served in Vietnam, if not Peoples' Park, and hailed the presidency of Ronald Reagan. But he probably felt he had nothing to show for it and his beloved country was going to Blacks on welfare, Vietnamese boat people, and the feminists and Gays, with him footing the tax bill when no one had ever helped his family when they were in need. It's a common story among the

descendants of the Dust Bowl refugees.

The 'Okies' were more accurately Southwestern for they came not only from Oklahoma but also surrounding states. By 1950, four million people or nearly a quarter of all persons born in Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, or Missouri, lived outside that region. A third of them settled in California while most of the others moved to Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington. The best known period of this trek westward is the period of the Dust Bowl, the 1930s, when the majority of the migrants first camped, and then settled mainly in the agricultural valleys of California. During World

War II many of the Central Valley Dust Bowl migrants moved nearer the defense plants, particularly around Los Angeles, to work, while a half-million more Southwestern migrants, dubbed 'defense Okies' arrived for wartime jobs.

To some, Okies and their descendants are bigots who supported George Wallace, and the Minutemen, the 'little people' and 'silent majority' addressed by Ronald Reagan and Richard Nixon, proponents of anti-abortion and anti-gay initiatives. To some Marxists, the Okies are petit-bourgeoisie who fall in and out of the owning and working class, unreliable in union struggles. There is truth in these negative images of the Okie. Depending on economic times, Okies may be self-employed or reluctantly working for a boss, but their dream is always to acquire land. A populist tradition is associated with the Okies, yet often they appear to hate the rich only out of envy. Generally hostile to 'big government' they are in the vanguard of defending their 'country' Many have been eager canon fodder, as well as officers, in America's foreign wars. They believe they are the designated beneficiaries of the theft of land from Indians and to the booty of empire.

In the end the only advantage for most has been the color of their skin and the white supremacy, particularly toward African-Americans, that pervades the culture; what they are not (black, Asian, 'foreign') is as important as what they are (white, 'true' Americans) in their sense of propriety and self-esteem. Novelist Ken Kesey embraces his Okie identity ambivalently:

I think of myself as an Oakie. Let me tell you what being an Oakie means: Being an Oakie means being the first of your whole family to finish high school let alone go on to college...Being an Oakie means getting rooted out of an area and having to hustle for a toehold in some new area...Being an Oakie means running the risk of striving out from under a layer of heartless sonsabitches only to discover you have become a redneck of bitterness worse than those you strove against...Being an Oakie is a low rent, aggravating drag.

The core group of those designated as 'Okies' are descendants of Ulster-Scots colonial settlers. Usually the Ulster-Scots descendants say their ancestors came to America from Ireland but their trek was more complicated than that. The Ulster-Scots were a people born and bred of empire. They were Protestant Scottish settlers in the British colony of Northern Ireland, where the indigenous inhabitants were Catholic. During the early 1600s, the British invaded and occupied Ireland, and declared a half-million acres of land in northern Ireland open to settlement under British protection; these settlers who contracted with the devil of early colonialism came from western Scotland. Scotland itself, along with Wales, had preceded Ireland as colonial notches in the belt of English expansion. Scottish farmers had been brutally evicted from the Highlands to make way for more profitable sheep raising and afterwards served the British as colonial settlers and soldiers. The Puritan policy of exterminating Indians in North America was similar, Richard Slotkin argues, to the Puritan colonization of Ulster, 'Where systematic assaults were made on Celtic tribalism, native bardic myth-historians were forbidden to sing, isolated clans were exterminated, and the rest of the population was ravaged.'

Cromwell even attempted to establish a wild Irish reservation in western Ireland'

By 1630, the British population settled in Ulster was larger than British settlement in all North America--21,000 English and 150,000 Lowland Scots. In 1641, the indigenous Irish rebelled and killed ten thousand settlers. Yet the Scottish settlers continued to pour in with the largest number arriving between 1690-97. They formed a majority of the population in some areas from which the indigenous Irish had been removed, but never the majority of all of Northern Ireland.

So the Ulster-Scots were already seasoned colonialists before they filled the ranks of the British settlers to North America. Before ever meeting American Indians, those Ulster-Scots had perfected scalping for bounty on their indigenous Irish victims. Later, during the early nineteenth century, after the U.S. was independent of Britain, Irish Catholics would immigrate in the millions, but the Ulster-Scots were another breed--they were the foot soldiers of empire; the Ulster-Scots and their progeny formed the shock troops of the 'westward movement,' that is, empire. By the time of U.S. independence, Scots, mainly Ulster-Scots, made up around one-sixth of the population and in some areas such as Pennsylvania, a third. Ulster-Scots immigration represented a mass movement between 1720 and the War of Independence. They constituted communities on the frontier where they predominated. By the time of the French-Indian war of 1754-63, the British armies were largely made up of Ulster-Scots. During the War of Independence, most Scottish settlers--Lowlander and Highlander, old and newcomers--remained loyal to the British Crown. However, the Ulster-Scots were in the forefront of independence and provided the backbone of Washington's fighting forces. During the last two decades of the eighteenth century, first and second generation Ulster-Scots continued to move westward into the Ohio Valley, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Indeed, they were the predominant element in the westward moving population stream maintaining many of the Scottish ways. Ulster-Scots were overwhelmingly frontier settlers rather than scouts, explorers, fur traders. They cleared forests, built log cabins, killed Indians, forming a wall of protection for the new U.S., and during times of war, they employed their fighting skills effectively.

They restlessly moved three or four time before settling at least semi-permanently. Although the majority of Ulster-Scots settlers were very poor, many unable to pay their passage to North America and had to indenture themselves, once settled they came to predominate, not only as soldier-settlers, but also in the fields of medicine, religion, and education. Perhaps most importantly, by the end of the eighteenth century, the Scottish Presbyterian church was the largest, strongest and most influential church next to the New England Congregationalist Church. And Ulster-Scots dominated the Great Awakening. Carl Degler writes that 'these hardy, God-fearing Calvinists made themselves into a veritable human shield of colonial civilization.'

In Richard Slotkin's mammoth trilogy on the American frontier, he finds the origin and reproduction of U.S. mythical-nationalism in the late eighteenth-century treks of settlers over the

Appalachian/Allegheny spine. Although Slotkin does not connect the myth-making with the Ulster-Scots covenant ideology, his thesis would appear to support the linkage.

It was the figure of Daniel Boone, the solitary, Indian-like hunter of the deep woods, that became the most significant, most emotionally compelling myth-hero of the early republic. The other myth-figures are reflections or variations of this basic type...The figure and the myth-narrative that emerged from the early Boone literature became archetypal for the American literature which followed: an American hero is the lover of the spirit of the wilderness, and his acts of love and sacred affirmation are acts of violence against that spirit and her avatars. Indeed it is rare even today to meet an Okie or any other descendant of the trekking culture who does not identify Daniel Boone as a direct ancestor, including my own family.

Slotkin finds several 'types' within the universal Boone archetype hero: 'New versions of the hero emerged, characters whose role was that of mediating between civilization and savagery, white and red. The yeoman farmer was one of these types, as were the explorer or surveyor and later, the naturalist.' Slotkin observes that later writers, notably James Fenimore Cooper, could remove the Boone story from its original context and use it to express their visions of the trek. Thereby the Boone archetype grew and changed with the development of American culture. However, the original myth, based on 'a series of associations which connect agronomy with utopia, Indian wars with the establishment of empire' remains intact.

In the twentieth century reformulation of the archetype, promoted notably in the writings of Theodore Roosevelt and, of course, western novels and films, Slotkin finds the 'hunter' and the 'farmer,' or 'breeder,' and especially 'the man who knows Indians.' This latter requirement, 'the man who knows Indians' is complex. Most Okies and other trekkers claim 'Indian blood,' although their white supremacy is unshaken in the face of culturally-identified Native Americans.

In Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* (released as a major film in 1992 at the five-hundred year anniversary of Columbus first voyage), the 'last Indian' hands over the country to Hawkeye, the Boone-type character, making the settlers the authentic inheritors of the land. Will Rogers, albeit an enrolled Cherokee with a land allotment, was culturally more Okie than Indian. His first entertainment act was a 'wild west' show in which he used the nickname, 'The Cherokee Kid.' Rogers was most popular with rural whites and is practically a cult figure among them today, while Native Americans do not claim him.

Many descendants of the Ulster-Scots trekked from Kentucky and Tennessee to Missouri and Arkansas, and then moved on to Oklahoma during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Breaking every treaty with the Indians, the federal government allowed the settlers to overrun Oklahoma and Indian Territories. Millions of landless farmers made the 'run' to stake their claims, but only a fraction acquired land or held on to it. In 1898, the Oklahoma settlers showed their appreciation--a third of Teddy Roosevelt's

'Rough Riders' that invaded Cuba were recruited from Oklahoma Territory. But Oklahoma was where the American dream had come to a halt, the end of the frontier.

For nearly three hundred years, the British and then the U.S. empire had offered free or cheap land to Anglo and Ulster-Scots, then Irish, German, and Scandinavian, then Polish and Czech peasants. If a farming family fell on bad times or wanted to have greater opportunity, they picked up and moved on, homesteading newly 'opened' territory. By 1880, all the arable land of the continent was owned--mostly large operators--and millions were landless.

While many poured into the cities to work, most stayed in rural areas as tenants, sharecroppers, migrant farm workers, cow punchers, and miners. Okies and other descendants of the Ulster-Scots migrations do not think of themselves as foot soldiers of empire, nor is that the image of them that dominates the popular imagination. They believe they are the true native-born Americans, the personification of what America is supposed to be. From their perceived ancestor, Daniel Boone, to Steinbeck's fictional Tom Joad, they are pure men of nature who are victims of bankers and other slick operators, and surrounded by red and brown and black and Jewish enemies, who they believe have hijacked their beloved country.

Oscar Ameringer, a native of Kansas, became the Socialist Party organizer in Oklahoma in 1907. He was doubtful about organizing farmers: 'Farmers were not wage earners. They were capitalists, exploiting wage labor. They owned the means of production. They had a great deal more to lose than their chains.'

Ameringer soon changed his mind. In his autobiography he wrote of speaking in Harrah, a small farming community eighty miles east of Oklahoma City: The meeting was in a one-room schoolhouse, unpainted on the outside, unsealed on the inside...Babies were sleeping on the speaker's platform. More babies slept, nursed, or cried on the breasts of their mothers, uncomfortably wedged into school seats designed for ten-year-olds. All were wretchedly dressed: faded blue jeans for the men; faded Mother Hubbards and poke bonnets for the women. These people had trudged in soaking rain, or come in open wagons or on horseback or muleback, to hear a socialist speech--and they were farmers! This indescribable aggregation of moisture, steam, dirt, rags, unshaven men, slatternly women and fretting children were farmers! I had come upon another America...No question but these people were American farmers, but not the kind I had known in the Pickaway plains of Ohio. These people occupied an even lower level of existence than the white and black 'water rats' of New Orleans.

Between 1906-1917, the Wobblies and the Socialist Party won converts on a mass scale in Oklahoma. They adopted the religious evangelist technique--indeed many evangelists were themselves converts to socialism--of holding huge week-long encampments with speakers, usually near small towns. Socialists were elected as local officials and the lamp posts of many towns were hung with red flags. In 1915 alone, 205 of the mass encampments were held. The Socialists never won a statewide race in Oklahoma but their

percentage increased from 1907 to 1914 from six to sixteen percent voting for the Socialist Party candidate, Eugene Debs. In 1914, the Socialist candidate for governor won 21 percent of the vote and they won five Congressional and one Senate seat, along with a majority of local offices. This phenomena was occurring in the State's Indian and African-American communities as well as the white ones.

The U.S. entrance into the European war in 1917 produced a wave of patriotism and a brutal backlash against the (all antiwar) Socialists in Oklahoma. In particular, the foreign born German and Czech farmers were persecuted in western Oklahoma. Fiery crosses burned all over the state, and the ranks and resources of the Ku Klux Klan burgeoned.

I began rethinking the role of Okie migrants in California in late April 1992, when a nearly all-white (ten out of twelve, with one Latina and one Asian) jury in Southern California found Los Angeles Police Department officers innocent in the videotaped beating of Rodney King the year before. My first thought on hearing the verdict was the same one as when I read about the change of venue from Los Angeles County to Ventura County, particularly Simi Valley: What do you expect in Simi Valley? It's an Okie town and the cops come from there. Why do you think Ronald Reagan built his presidential library there?

A large number of Simi Valley homeowners are second and third generation Dust Bowl and Defense Okie refugees, the ones who made it. Yet I noticed that none of the plethora of news reports mentioned the fact—they would point out that Simi Valley was virtually all white and was a favored suburb for LA cops to buy homes, without mentioning that many of those cops had grown up there, or in other Ventura County and Central Valley towns. Even Mike Davis's City of Quartz does not mention the Okie migration or break down the ethnic composition of the eccentric LA police department—he uses generic 'predominately white.'

Yet Okie migrants were perceived as left-populists during the 1930s, and the U.S. Communist Party focused on organizing the farm laborers. This was the decade when a general strike shut down San Francisco, vigilantes attacked union organizers in the Central Valley, and the Red Squad hunted Communist in Los Angeles. Will Rogers, the most famous entertainer of the time, an Oklahoman transplanted to Hollywood, supported socialist-author Upton Sinclair in his run for governor of California: 'a darn nice fellow, and just plum smart, and if he could deliver even some of the things he promises, should not only be governor of one state, but president of all of 'em.'

Upton Sinclair swept the Democratic primary for governor of California in 1934, shaking up the long-entrenched elite with the prospect of a socialist governor of the nation's most volatile state, sparking a revolution in American politics. Sinclair's grass-roots support came mainly from hundreds of thousands of dust-bowl refugees. The New York Times noted that it was 'the first serious movement against the profit system in the United States.' And even though Sinclair lost the election, Mitchell points out, the campaign and its grass-roots support, mainly the hundreds of thousands of

dust-bowl refugees, radicalized a whole generation of activists, many of them artists, performers, intellectuals, and writers.

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